

Second Sunday in Lent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
March 5th, 2017

In school, there was one subject I never enjoyed. I saw the importance of science, math, and, of course, religion, but I hated grammar. What put me over the edge was dissecting sentences. It was complicated with its many lines – horizontal, vertical, and dotted. I was already struggling with parts of speech, and dissecting sentences crossed the line into my firm hatred with grammar. Yet, it turns out that the parts of speech matter. Who would have thought?! To understand the full impact of today’s gospel, we must understand verbs and nouns to best grasp the word “believe.”

In today’s reading we heard the word “believe.” In fact, we had the same Greek word, *pisteuo*, seven times in today’s reading. It was translated as believed, believes, and believe in English. Now, here’s something really important, believe is *always* a verb in John, it is *never* a noun.¹

So, why does that matter? Often people think that belief is stagnant. We start the creeds with “I believe.” Sometimes we think that we’re only consenting to a doctrine or specific structure. When, in the book of John, believe is actually a verb. “Believing is an action that one does, not an object or thing that one possesses.”² Believing is active. To believe moves.

Siblings in Christ, I’m going to get real with you here for a few minutes. We have a problem in the church. Not specifically here at WPLC, but across the United States and well beyond. There is a growing concern with the purpose of the church. Some say that the leadership is becoming too

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=851

² <http://catholic-resources.org/John/Themes-Believe.htm>

political. These folks are getting nervous about our current political climate and how that aligns with the message of Christ. Frankly, I'm with them. The message of Christ is unsettling, it is challenging, and it has political implications. To be clear, the phrase "political implications" does not mean it's connected to a particular government party, structure, or ideology. However, it does mean that Christianity has something to say to those who govern.

Here's what I mean: The church and our faith are rooted in Jesus's teachings to love God, love neighbor, and love self. Jesus rejected fear, he focused on relationality, and he loved *all* people. It is a simplistic formula. Yet, so many things get in the way. We make idols out of success, we prioritize our physique, we make money our goal, we trick ourselves into thinking that happiness is the endgame, we idolize safety, we latch onto the known, and we look to worldly leaders to bring us salvation. Still, that is not Jesus's message, nor is it a biblical message – that's an entirely different message. Instead, we are compelled by Christ's example to engage. We speak against anything that is opposed to Jesus's life-giving and loving mission.

In the 1979, well before our current political climate, Lutherans put it this way, the church is "the people of God called and sent to minister under [God's] authority in the world." And we are called to be creative critics of the social order, to advocate for the needy, to improve human dignity, and to support good order, justice, and harmony.³ Put another way by our denomination, the ELCA, "As a public church, we have a responsibility to step outside our comfort zones and challenge ourselves to address issues that affect families, communities and neighbors throughout the world. As a church body, [we use our] prophetic voice boldly to address important political, social and economic issues that affect local and global communities. This work grows out of our

³ http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Church_And_GovernmentALC80.pdf

theological understanding of God at work in the world.”⁴ You see, we don’t make up our own sense of justice, we don’t flounder in our own direction, we look to Christ’s example of justice - for this is Christ’s table, this is Christ’s font, and this is Christ’s church.

In today’s reading Jesus reminds Nicodemus of the appearance of Christ’s church. We come to trust God when we are made new in water and the Spirit. In our baptism, we promise to strive for justice and peace. We commit to a new life in baptism where we seek to bring about the kingdom of God.

Wait a second. “Kingdom of God” – that’s a phrase Jesus says a lot. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most political statement of all time, where does the phrase “kingdom of God” rank? Well, this statement in Jesus’ time would be about a nine or ten. It is a highly political statement. Remember, Jesus is living in the kingdom of Caesar. The phrase “kingdom of God” is saying that it’s God’s principles that dictate how people are to be treated. While Jesus doesn’t tell the government the best way to do things, he does advocate for a particular political worldview, or in other words, Jesus advocates for particular policies that impact the general public.⁵

Each Sunday we proclaim that same sense of advocacy as we pray the Lord’s prayer saying, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.” This is a statement of protest as much as it is a statement of surrender. This is a political statement as much as it is a spiritual declaration. This is a clear proclamation that we don’t come here to pat ourselves on the back, but rather we come here to explore how God’s love might propagate more fully in the world. We come here to explore the stories of faithful believers and how they’ve seen God working in, with, and through them. We come here to learn to trust more deeply in our loving God. As Christians, the

⁴ <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/ELCAVotes/Called>

⁵ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/5-ways-to-be-political-the-way-jesus-early-christians-were-political/>

real question we're sent with is not *if* we should be active in the world, but rather *how far* are we willing to go.

Today's gospel reminds us that our God went far, incredibly far. Jesus gave himself fully. He was beaten, tortured, lifted up on a cross, and took his last gasping breath – that is how far Jesus was willing to go to prove love. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” – and this translation is weak. The Greek word here for “world” is *kosmos*. Throughout the rest of John's gospel, it is designated as something that is hostile to God. A better translation might be, “For God so loved the God-hating world.”⁶ It was into that God-hating world that God sent Christ, not to condemn the world, even though the world hated God, but instead Christ was sent to save this messed up world. So “that everyone who believes,” or better translated as, “everyone that actively trusts in God's liberating sense of love might be set free.”

You see, nothing could separate God from being in a deep relationship with you. A relationship of dependence – where we are the children and God is a loving parent. A relationship where we fully trust God's grace and provisions. A relationship where we can be sent out to be in relationship with the immigrant, the poor, the lonely, the fearful, the hurting, the refugee, and any other person who stands on the outside looking inward.

The story of Nicodemus begs the question, “How far are you willing to go to actively participate in God's reign of love?” We hear that Nicodemus first came to Jesus in the dark of night. He recognized the signs that Jesus came from God, yet he didn't see the reign of love. However, the story was not over for Nicodemus. We'll see him again a few chapters and once more after Jesus dies. Nicodemus will never come out of the dark, but he will become more active in his trust. That's often true of our faith too - we're timid, we're uncertain, we don't know what to do,

⁶ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/03/lent-2-a-just-one-more-verse/>

and we have fears and reservations. We live in the shadow of Christ, but have we come to discover eternal life? Have we fully embrace the love of God given to this God-hating world? Have we helped to share this kingdom of God to the world?

The story of Nicodemus is only one of the many great stories of faith we find in the Scriptures. Each Sunday we gather to be inspired and challenged as we step into these stories. At this year's Easter Vigil, we'll deeply immerse ourselves in a variety of scriptural passages. There, on that night, in a dimly-lit room, holding candles, we will dramatically engage with these texts. There, we'll hear stories that help us learn a bit more about God. We'll discover images of the new-life in Christ's resurrection. We will gather at the font to witness and remember the birth of water and the spirit. And, we will be sent having learned a bit more about ourselves.

These stories of faith are powerful, they're compelling, and they're transformational. We discover that in John, believe is a verb. We don't sit here as nouns, but we get to work as verbs. We are sent into the light to expose injustice. We are sent to love all people. We are urged to speak out against any and all injustice. "For God so loved this God-hating world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who actively trusts in God's liberating sense of love might be set free." That is God's work completed with our hands. And Nicodemus' story makes me wonder, "How far are you willing to go?" No matter where you land with that question, be reminded that you are loved and that our God goes to the extreme to show that love. Amen.